

Business Services Industry

0 Comments

Marx on Suicide

Capital & Class, Autumn 2001 by Dennis, Alex

Marx on Suicide Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1999. pp. 152 ISBN 0-810-11638-3 (pbk) 12.50 ISBN 0-810-11632-4 (hbk) 42.50

Marx wrote 'Peuchet on Suicide' in 1846 for publication in Moses Hess' *Gesellschaftsspiegel*. In accordance with his humanist-and, more importantly here, humanitarian-sentiments, the emphasis here is on the extent to which capitalist social relations mean suffering not just economically, for the proletariat, but also spiritually and morally for all members of society. In particular, Marx here uses studies of family life to show how untenable the bourgeois ideal is-- even for the bourgeoisie. His intent was also, of course, polemical. In producing this text, Marx was arguing against the German (True) socialists' preoccupation with high theory, and recommending the French tradition of providing empirical examples of the misery of contemporary life as a useful counterpoint. This work thus presages the more virulent attack on the German socialists to be found in the Communist Manifesto, produced two years later.

Marx translates a handful of case studies from Jacques Peuchet's posthumously published *Memoirs from the Police Archives* to demonstrate both the horrors of capitalist social relations-- even for the bourgeoisie-and to show by example how grounding social theory in concrete examples of everyday life can act as a brake on theoretical excess. This, therefore is not really 'Marx on suicide' but 'Marx's translation of Peuchet on suicide'. It is in this sense that the text is most interesting: Marx deliberately exaggerates Peuchet's 'revolutionary' sentiments to paint French social thought in a more favourable light. Thus, Peuchet's sentence 'Without dwelling on theories, I will try to present facts,' becomes Marx's 'I found that, short of a total reform of the organisation of our current society, all other attempts would be in vain (p.50). Such changes were left unattributed, and Plaut and Anderson's careful annotations allow us to see this reworking as an instantiation of Marx's intent.

This is the first main problem with this work. Insofar as Marx is dealing with alienation and-in particular-the choking, suffocating effects of bourgeois family life, his views are far better represented in other works. These topics are covered in a more rigorous and thorough manner in *The Holy Family* and also, with regard to the hypocritical attitude of bourgeois moralists to the 'immoral' organisation of proletarian family life, in certain passages in *Capital* (chapter 15 in particular is referred to in Anderson's introduction). Given this, therefore, this work only serves to illustrate Marx's manipulative organisational preoccupations-without the depth or originality of his more open critique of Weston in *Value, Price and Profit*, for example.

Such preoccupations open the door to a more biographical consideration of the piece, which the editors are happy to provide. Unfortunately, this rapidly moves away from the organisational or social contexts in which Marx was writing and into the territory of his 'real' motives, personality, etc. While Anderson successfully shows how this piece fits into Marx's corpus of work as a whole,

with all the usual caveats applying, Plaut emphasises its relationship to other `theories of suicide'-here Durkheim's and Freud's-without much success. Given the nature of the text, to attempt such a comparison is bound to be somewhat thin, but concluding that Durkheim would have viewed Marx's life as anomic and that Freud would have seen Marx's emotional life as `pervaded by aggression' hardly constitutes analytical rigour. Indeed, it is strangely akin to Terman's attempts to work out the probable IQs of great historical characters from their biographical records (comically described in Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*).

Something of the sort, however, is perhaps necessary. Marx's own article, translated and annotated, comes to only 25 pages. Without these introductions, this would clearly not be enough to justify its publication in book form. That this is an issue for the editors is surely further demonstrated by their `attention to textual comprehensiveness'. Following Marx's paper (which is more than adequately annotated) in English, the German original is presented. Following that, Peuchet's original text is presented in French. Thus, 70 pages of the 147 made available are devoted to the raw materials on which the translation is based-despite the fact that where Marx changes Peuchet or the translators change Marx this is carefully annotated in the English text. It is difficult, even charitably, to see this as other than padding, particularly given that Marx's German text was reprinted in the original MEGA in 1932, and Peuchet's could presumably be found through a good reference library.

Although of some biographical interest, therefore, this does not add to our understandings of Marx's work as a whole, and certainly does not usefully inform our contemporary views on suicide and its causes. It shows Marx to be a humanitarian, in 1846 dogmatically so, but whether or not he was a good or happy person (which at times is the issue the introductory chapters seem to point towards) is not really a pressing concern.

Copyright Conference of Socialist Economists Autumn 2001

Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights Reserved